

Interview with Fazil Say, Vienna, August-03, 2007

(the following text is based on the recorded interview and has not been edited or cut)

F: Fazil Say

I: Ingrid Hedlund

I: MIAGI is a co-operating organisation to the South African national commission for UNESCO and we follow UNESCO's maxim: 'sustainable development and the flourishing of culture are interdependent'. We believe that music heals and elevates our spirit and that active music training contributes to healthy psycho-social development. Could you give us some of your impressions?

F: Yes - this is the most wonderful thing. We have a most famous example in Venezuela and the National System of Children and Youth Orchestras and Choirs there that has achieved amazing results by providing music education for at risk children in particular. And there is Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in which young Arabs and Israelis play together. I again, have arranged concerts for youth in Anatolia, a part of Turkey with hardly any tradition in classical music. The feed-back has been wonderful!

This is the second time I come to South Africa. I know running something like MIAGI must be an incredible effort and I respect the MIAGI team immensely for that. And I must say that one of the most beautiful orchestras I ever played with was the MIAGI Orchestra in 2006. It was a very, very inspiring and emotional day of my life to play together with this wonderful group of young players of all colours.

I understand this idea and I am always with you in it! The realisation of it must be very difficult, but it is very difficult also in Israel and it is

difficult in Turkey. I was reading the memoirs of Pablo Casals. He was explaining what it was that made him decide to go and play for the

workers in factories. One of the reasons was that we as artists are very lonely in a way, as we travel from concert hall to concert hall. But most importantly Casals knew that great music doesn't belong only to those that can afford going to classical concerts, it belongs to everybody! So you will also see, that in years to come the plants we are planting will be carrying flowers!

I: You were born in Turkey in 1970. Do you remember your strongest musical experience as a child?

F: My parents were not musicians, but they loved classical music very much, and so we had lots of LPs at home with music by Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bach...I remember listening to all of this since the age of two and at that point I also became lots of children's toy instruments, small organs, flutes, xylophones...and all day long I was repeating that music from hearing on my instruments...I: I would love to here some recordings of yours from those days!...F: Yes there are - I have some at home! We have one where I really truly am playing a symphony, melody and all, Mozart's 40<sup>th</sup>! So you see, my parents were supporting my playing very much, and then very soon, I began taking piano lessons with a teacher who also encouraged my improvisation and composing. He had a great sense for natural playing and I was already playing with two hands at the first lesson! As far as I could play harmonics and melody together I did this as an autodidactic. We did many years of improvisation and composition during the lessons. I: You were very lucky in finding such a fine teacher. F: Yes, very!

I: For an artist at your level you would probably agree with me that your life is your art and your art is your life...the two are one...F: Yes... I: do you feel there is something guiding you in this process, something that is always there perhaps?

F: What is always there is that music is making my happiness and sadness at the same time. I would say that I would be very much a nothing without music. Music always touches my entire soul if you do this many, many times, you need it!, it is like food and water after a while. . . to touch your

own body and soul with music and to always go deeper and deeper. And I am telling people with the sound my real, my own, thoughts. It is like being

naked, my soul is naked in front of people, which is sometimes very risky task because if it doesn't work it looks like a bad soul and I don't want this....(laughs)...yeah... because of this it is a very great passion and a very great stress at the same time.

I: Apart from your first teacher, who were your most important teachers?

I left Turkey at the age of 17. I got a scholarship to go to Germany to study in Düsseldorf with David Levine who was a great artist. I studied with him for four years. He also had a very dramatic life. At that time he had AIDS and died five years later. So humanly speaking, for me, it was developing both sides, seeing suffering and seeing how music can help. I learned to believe in the healing power of music because my teacher stayed alive for so long. At that time, at the end of the 80's beginning of 90's, it was a very long time for somebody suffering of AIDS, but he stayed alive because of beauty, beauty was helping him more than medicaments! To see, through my teacher, what real dedication means, was helping also me very much because in these years I was beginning to have my own crises and anti-crisis. This time was soul development for me and a time of finding my own language. It was very important because I am not belonging to the players who are playing 'academically correctly'. I want to make each piece my own and so natural that my body and my mind are one in it. This is very difficult.

I: Your learning processes and reasoning as a composer and performer? Do you have any conscious 'methods' or is it mostly an intuitive process?

F: It is an intuitive process.

I: How would you define intuition, can you put it into words in any way?

F: In creation I am searching what I actually like, what my soul likes. It is kind of like going into, and through, a darkness, and without being disturbed, waiting for very long in the darkness... sometimes for ages...this is a very difficult situation for somebody's psyche... to be in that hole, that dark empty space in the universe...and then somehow you

start sensing that from somewhere it is coming...the energies... and you go there...and between the energies I then have to find the right for the

music...it is a very decisive procedure... and very difficult to explain because it is so abstract.

I: When you listen to other musicians - you obviously listen to them at that same 'soul level' too... F: yes... and you can't really define why you respond positively or not?

F: Well I must say, and many musicians will tell the same, it is difficult for us to listen to music by others. We are afraid of their mistakes because we are afraid of our mistakes! So, I have to listen only to the greatest things that I want to reach like the greatest compositions, the most interesting players, and they are inspiring me very much.

I: Can you name a few?

F: For me the creative pianists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Horowitz, Benedetti-Michelangeli and Glenn Gould. And among the jazz-pianists, Art Tatum, a very, very great intuitive player! And composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stravinsky and Bartók, they were really creating great emotions.

I: There are not many recordings by the great composers of the past, Bach for instance, would definitely have been absolutely amazing to listen to, but there are some, for instance by Rachmaninov?

F: I have some Rachmaninov recordings and he plays so naturally. Of course also because he is playing his own music. As we were just talking earlier about 'natural', for an artist to make somebody else's music totally your own is a very difficult long way. But when I play my own music I don't worry, because it is mine, the mistakes are mine...so when I play my music it is always natural. The smell of the day, the piano, the acoustics, all those things you know... nothing can ever disturb me, I just play, because it is mine! But as an interpret, if I play Rachmaninov, I have hundred more worries. I am playing his soul and there are so many alternative streets to choose. You have to choose which one you go and the most important thing is that I am satisfied with my street. Sometimes it is very radical and it is often against some of the critics, some of the audience or the academics. But these are our polemics of course.

I: Regarding these aspects, the issue of critics for instance, is there anything that you find particularly hindering or negative on the international music scene?

F: Well, all this is part of creativeness, the polemics, it just IS like this! We have to remember that Tchaikovsky wrote his piano concerto, and dedicated it to Anton Rubinstein, who was one of the greatest musicians at the time. And when Tchaikovsky played it for him for the first time, Rubinstein found the concerto a complete disaster, he said it is banal and simply terrible. Tchaikovsky went back to his room and he was crying. Still he told Rubinstein that he would not change one single bar, one single note, in it. And now, this concerto is regarded one of the greatest pieces in the history of music.

I: Turkey is still to many people a rather unknown part of this earth, with a touch of secrecy and magic - fairytale - fascinating and maybe a little frightening too. How do you see your role as a Turkish musician?

F: Turkey is a county between East and West and my soul belongs to the Western part of cultural development but I know very well the Eastern culture and I respect it very much. And interestingly enough, almost all my compositions are coming out of this Eastern element as it comes to me through song, dance and poetry. It makes me very happy to make these bridges between cultures for myself and also for the audience this is very interesting. If somebody is coming from India he brings something from India, just as Sibelius brought something from Finland, Rachmaninov from Russia and so on. Likewise I always want to bring something from Turkey.

I: How are you living UNESCO's statement 'sustainable development and the flourishing of culture are interdependent' in your country?

F: The problem is that despite the truth of this statement, it is still very difficult to find money for developmental cultural work, and this means you will have to have a very, very big dedication if you anyway decide to work for it. As an artist I feel I am giving very much, to students at Turkish universities and so on, but I would like the other artists to come behind and join me but unfortunately not many feel they want or can join.

For this kind of dedication as you well know, one doesn't necessarily get paid much ... I: Yes, I know F:... but if you would take 100 artists, and one year one group would be responsible for developmental work, another year another. Then the movement would become such a strength and vitality, and it would naturally also help the artists!

I: The fact that serving the bigger picture generously without bothering about ones immediate return of investment is actually serving us all, is a fact people still are often blind for I think. And in being blind for it we actually jeopardize ourselves.

F: Material benefits, are a natural by-product of such a movement, and the more of us behind it, the bigger the beneficial effects.

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